

Social Workers

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Significant Points

- While a bachelor's degree is the minimum requirement, a master's degree in social work or a related field has become the standard for many positions.
- Employment is projected to grow faster than average.
- Competition for jobs is expected in cities, but opportunities should be good in rural areas.

Nature of the Work

Social work is a profession for those with a strong desire to help improve people's lives. Social workers help people function the best way they can in their environment, deal with their relationships, and solve personal and family problems. Social workers often see clients who face a life-threatening disease or a social problem. These problems may include inadequate housing, unemployment, serious illness, disability, or substance abuse. Social workers also assist families that have serious domestic conflicts, including those involving child or spousal abuse.

Social workers often provide social services in health-related settings that now are governed by managed care organizations. To contain costs, these organizations are emphasizing short-term intervention, ambulatory and community-based care, and greater decentralization of services.

Most social workers specialize. Although some conduct research or are involved in planning or policy development, most social workers prefer an area of practice in which they interact with clients.

Child, family, and school social workers provide social services and assistance to improve the social and psychological functioning of children and their families and to maximize the family well-being and academic functioning of children. Some social workers assist single parents; arrange adoptions; and help find foster homes for neglected, abandoned, or abused children. In schools, they address such problems as teenage pregnancy, misbehavior, and truancy. They also advise teachers on how to cope with problem students. Some social workers may specialize in services for senior citizens. They run support groups for family caregivers or for the adult children of aging parents. Some advise elderly people or family members about choices in areas such as housing, transportation, and long-term care; they also coordinate and monitor services. Through employee assistance programs, they may help workers cope with job-related pressures or with personal problems that affect the quality of their work. Child, family, and school social workers typically work in individual and family services agencies, schools, or State or local governments. These social workers may be known as child welfare social workers, family services social workers, child protective services social workers, occupational social workers, or gerontology social workers.

Medical and public health social workers provide persons, families, or vulnerable populations with the psychosocial support needed to cope with chronic, acute, or terminal illnesses, such as Alzheimer's disease, cancer, or AIDS. They also advise family caregivers, counsel patients, and help plan for patients' needs after discharge by arranging for at-home services—from meals-on-wheels to oxygen equipment. Some work on interdis-

ciplinary teams that evaluate certain kinds of patients—geriatric or organ transplant patients, for example. Medical and public health social workers may work for hospitals, nursing and personal care facilities, individual and family services agencies, or local governments.

Mental health and substance abuse social workers assess and treat individuals with mental illness, or substance abuse problems, including abuse of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. Such services include individual and group therapy, outreach, crisis intervention, social rehabilitation, and training in skills of everyday living. They may also help plan for supportive services to ease patients' return to the community. Mental health and substance abuse social workers are likely to work in hospitals, substance abuse treatment centers, individual and family services agencies, or local governments. These social workers may be known as clinical social workers. (Counselors and psychologists, who may provide similar services, are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Other types of social workers include social work planners and policymakers, who develop programs to address such issues as child abuse, homelessness, substance abuse, poverty, and violence. These workers research and analyze policies, programs, and regulations. They identify social problems and suggest legislative and other solutions. They may help raise funds or write grants to support these programs.

Working Conditions

Full-time social workers usually work a standard 40-hour week; however, some occasionally work evenings and weekends to meet with clients, attend community meetings, and handle emergencies. Some, particularly in voluntary nonprofit agencies, work part time. Social workers usually spend most of their time in an office or residential facility, but also may travel locally to visit clients, meet with service providers, or attend meetings. Some may use one of several offices within a local area in which to meet with clients. The work, while satisfying, can be emotionally draining. Understaffing and large caseloads add to the pressure in some agencies. To tend to patient care or client needs, many hospitals and long-term care facilities are employing social workers on teams with a broad mix of occupations—including clinical specialists, registered nurses, and health aides.



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Employment

Social workers held about 477,000 jobs in 2002. About 4 out of 10 jobs were in State or local government agencies, primarily in departments of health and human services. Most private sector jobs were in the health care and social assistance industry. Although most social workers are employed in cities or suburbs, some work in rural areas. The following tabulation shows 2002 employment by type of social worker.

Child, family, and school social workers	274,000
Medical and public health social workers	107,000
Mental health and substance abuse social workers	95,000

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

A bachelor’s degree in social work (BSW) degree is the most common minimum requirement to qualify for a job as a social worker; however, majors in psychology, sociology, and related fields may be adequate to qualify for some entry-level jobs, especially in small community agencies. Although a bachelor’s degree is sufficient for entry into the field, an advanced degree has become the standard for many positions. A master’s degree in social work (MSW) is typically required for positions in health settings and is required for clinical work. Some jobs in public and private agencies also may require an advanced degree, such as a master’s degree in social services policy or administration. Supervisory, administrative, and staff training positions usually require an advanced degree. College and university teaching positions and most research appointments normally require a doctorate in social work (DSW or Ph.D.).

As of 2002, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited 436 BSW programs and 149 MSW programs. The Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE) listed 78 doctoral programs in social work (DSW or Ph.D.). BSW programs prepare graduates for direct service positions such as caseworker. They include courses in social work values and ethics, dealing with a culturally diverse clientele, at-risk-populations, promotion of social and economic justice, human behavior and the social environment, social welfare policy and services, social work practice, social research methods, and field education. Accredited BSW programs require a minimum of 400 hours of supervised field experience.

Master’s degree programs prepare graduates for work in their chosen field of concentration and continue to develop the skills required to perform clinical assessments, manage large caseloads, and explore new ways of drawing upon social services to meet the needs of clients. Master’s programs last 2 years and include a minimum of 900 hours of supervised field instruction, or internship. A part-time program may take 4 years. Entry into a master’s program does not require a bachelor’s in social work, but courses in psychology, biology, sociology, economics, political science, and social work are recommended. In addition, a second language can be very helpful. Most master’s programs offer advanced standing for those with a bachelor’s degree from an accredited social work program.

All States and the District of Columbia have licensing, certification, or registration requirements regarding social work practice and the use of professional titles. Although standards for licensing vary by State, a growing number of States are placing greater emphasis on communications skills, professional ethics, and sensitivity to cultural diversity issues. Additionally, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) offers voluntary credentials. Social workers with an MSW may be eligible for the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW),

the Qualified Clinical Social Worker (QCSW), or the Diplomate in Clinical Social Work (DCSW) credential based on their professional experience. Credentials are particularly important for those in private practice; some health insurance providers require social workers to have them in order to be reimbursed for services.

Social workers should be emotionally mature, objective, and sensitive to people and their problems. They must be able to handle responsibility, work independently, and maintain good working relationships with clients and coworkers. Volunteer or paid jobs as a social work aide offer ways of testing one’s interest in this field.

Advancement to supervisor, program manager, assistant director, or executive director of a social service agency or department is possible, but usually requires an advanced degree and related work experience. Other career options for social workers include teaching, research, and consulting. Some of these workers also help formulate government policies by analyzing and advocating policy positions in government agencies, in research institutions, and on legislators’ staffs.

Some social workers go into private practice. Most private practitioners are clinical social workers who provide psychotherapy, usually paid for through health insurance or by the client themselves. Private practitioners must have at least a master’s degree and a period of supervised work experience. A network of contacts for referrals also is essential. Many private practitioners work part time while they work full time elsewhere.

Job Outlook

Competition for social worker jobs is stronger in cities, where demand for services often is highest and training programs for social workers are prevalent. However, opportunities should be good in rural areas, which often find it difficult to attract and retain qualified staff. By specialty, job prospects may be best for those social workers with a background in gerontology and substance abuse treatment.

Employment of social workers is expected to increase faster than the average for all occupations through 2012. The rapidly growing elderly population and the aging baby boom generation will create greater demand for health and social services, resulting in particularly rapid job growth among gerontology social workers. Many job openings also will stem from the need to replace social workers who leave the occupation.

As hospitals continue to limit the length of patient stays, the demand for social workers in hospitals will grow more slowly than in other areas. Because hospitals are releasing patients earlier than in the past, social worker employment in home healthcare services is growing. However, the expanding senior population is an even larger factor. Employment opportunities for social workers with backgrounds in gerontology should be good in the growing numbers of assisted-living and senior-living communities. The expanding senior population will also spur demand for social workers in nursing homes, long-term care facilities, and hospices.

Employment of substance abuse social workers will grow rapidly over the 2002-12 projection period. Substance abusers are increasingly being placed into treatment programs instead of being sentenced to prison. As this trend grows, demand will increase for treatment programs and social workers to assist abusers on the road to recovery.

Employment of social workers in private social service agencies will increase. However, agencies increasingly will restructure services and hire more lower-paid social and human service

assistants instead of social workers. Employment in State and local government agencies may grow somewhat in response to increasing needs for public welfare, family services, and child protection services; however, many of these services will be contracted out to private agencies. Employment levels in public and private social services agencies may fluctuate, depending on need and government funding levels.

Employment of school social workers also is expected to steadily grow. Expanded efforts to respond to rising student enrollments and continued emphasis on integrating disabled children into the general school population may lead to more jobs. Availability of State and local funding will be a major factor in determining the actual job growth in schools.

Opportunities for social workers in private practice will expand but growth may be somewhat hindered by restrictions that managed care organizations put on mental health services. The growing popularity of employee assistance programs is expected to spur some demand for private practitioners, some of whom provide social work services to corporations on a contractual basis. However, the popularity of employee assistance programs will fluctuate with the business cycle, as businesses are not likely to offer these services during recessions.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of child, family, and school social workers were \$33,150 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$26,310 and \$42,940. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$21,270, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$54,250. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of child, family, and school social workers in 2002 were:

Elementary and secondary schools	\$44,100
Local government	38,140
State government	34,000
Individual and family services	29,150
Other residential care facilities	28,470

Median annual earnings of medical and public health social workers were \$37,380 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$29,700 and \$46,540. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$23,840, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$56,320. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of medical and public health social workers in 2002 were:

General medical and surgical hospitals	\$42,730
Local government	37,620
State government	35,250
Nursing care facilities	33,330
Individual and family services	31,000

Median annual earnings of mental health and substance abuse social workers were \$32,850 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$25,940 and \$42,160. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$21,050, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$52,240. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of mental health and substance abuse social workers in 2002 were:

State government	\$38,430
Local government	35,700
Psychiatric and substance abuse hospitals	34,610
Outpatient care centers	31,370
Individual and family services	31,300

Related Occupations

Through direct counseling or referral to other services, social workers help people solve a range of personal problems. Workers in occupations with similar duties include the clergy, counselors, probation officers and correctional treatment specialists, psychologists, and social and human services assistants.

Sources of Additional Information

For information about career opportunities in social work and voluntary credentials for social workers, contact:

► National Association of Social Workers, 750 First St. NE., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20002-4241. Internet: <http://www.socialworkers.org>

For a listing of accredited social work programs, contact:

► Council on Social Work Education, 1725 Duke St., Suite 500, Alexandria, VA 22314-3457. Internet: <http://www.cswe.org>

Information on licensing requirements and testing procedures for each State may be obtained from State licensing authorities, or from:

► Association of Social Work Boards, 400 South Ridge Pkwy., Suite B, Culpeper, VA 22701. Internet: <http://www.aswb.org>